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AUTHOR	Snow, Don
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ABSTRACT

Each year, thousands of men and women from English-speaking countries go abroad as English teachers through volunteer agencies such as the Peace Corps or Voluntary Service Overseas, or through myriad other church, government, business, and academic organizations. For these novice teachers, the challenge of learning what to do in the classroom is compounded by the difficult process of adjusting to life in a foreign culture. Teaching English as a novice teacher in a foreign country is very different from working as a trained professional in an English-speaking country, and knowing how to speak English is not the same as knowing how to teach it. This digest offers novice English teachers an introduction to teaching abroad. Specific guidance is provided on the following: (1) how to prepare before leaving home; (2) orienting to the foreign country after arrival and preparing before the classroom experience begins; (3) the first days of class; (4) course planning (including goals, teaching methods, instructional materials, and evaluation); (5) lesson planning and classroom survival; and (6) adapting to the host culture. (JL)

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TEACHING ENGLISH ABROAD: AN INTRODUCTION

DON SNOW

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Teaching English Abroad: An Introduction

Don Snow, Amity Foundation, Overseas Coordination Office

This digest is drawn from *More than a Native Speaker: An Introduction for Volunteers Teaching Abroad*, by Don Snow. It is available from TESOL, 1600 Cameron Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, VA 22314. The book provides a nontechnical introduction to English teaching that is geared toward the special needs of native-English-speaking teachers working abroad.

Each year, thousands of men and women from English-speaking nations go abroad as English teachers through agencies such as the Peace Corps or Voluntary Service Overseas, or through myriad other government, church, business, and academic organizations. For these novice English teachers, the challenge of learning what to do in the classroom is compounded by the difficult process of adjusting to life in a foreign culture. Teaching English as a novice teacher in a foreign country is very different from teaching as a trained professional in an English-speaking country, and knowing how to speak English is not the same as knowing how to teach English. Learning the craft of language teaching by trial and error is a process that can take a long time and involve considerable wear and tear on teachers and on students. This digest offers novice English teachers an introduction to teaching English abroad.

Know Before You Go

Before leaving home, there are several ways you can prepare to teach abroad. One way is to talk to people who have lived in the host country, especially those who have served there as teachers. Through a local university, you can often locate native citizens of the host country or other individuals who have lived or worked there. It is also a good idea to start looking for books about the culture and history of the host country before you leave. Books in English in the host country may be scarce, and often those that are available provide only a limited perspective.

Another form of predeparture preparation is English teaching experience. Many community organizations and churches run volunteer-taught English classes for immigrants and refugees. Although teaching English to immigrants in an English-speaking country is different from teaching English abroad, the experience can provide opportunities for learning to communicate with people whose native language is not English. One of the most important skills a language teacher should have is the ability to make instructions understood. Practicing in your home country helps to hone that skill. This kind of teaching experience will also put you in contact with people who are undergoing the difficulties involved in adjusting to a foreign culture. Understanding their culture shock experience may help you as you adjust to life in your host country.

A final way to prepare in advance is to collect resources for your classes. This may be difficult, as you may have little or no information in advance about your particular teaching situation. The best solution is to be prepared for a variety of situations; flexibility is key. Because you may be unsure of the teaching context, a general repertoire of useful materials should include one or two books on language teaching, a book on English grammar, a writing text that contains ideas on how to structure a writing class, a book of listening and speaking activities, and a book of cultural information about your home country that can be used for culture lessons. Photographs of your country, family, or hometown are good conversation starters, and a tape recorder and a short-wave radio will give you access to worldwide English news broadcasts and allow you to tape listening materials. The materials that you choose should be adaptable to students of different skill levels, work in large or small class situations, and not require audiovisual or duplication equipment which may be unavailable.

After Arrival: Before the First Day of Class

Besides adjusting to your immediate surroundings, your priorities may center around planning the first day of class. No matter how strong the desire is to jump into preparing the first lessons, it is important to devote a day or so to getting a lay of the land. As part of the self-orientation process, it will be helpful to find out as much about your teaching situation as possible. Here are some questions to which you might want to find answers before the first day of class:

- Why are your students learning English?
- What are reasonable expectations for student progress?
- What are the students' goals? The goals of the school?
- What teaching methods is a teacher expected to use?
- What learning strategies and styles are students accustomed to?
- What kinds of teaching materials and equipment are available?
- How readily can materials be duplicated?
- What is available in the classroom?
- How many students will be in your classes?
- How much are teachers expected to know?
- How are teachers supposed to behave in class? Expected to dress?
- What expectations exist about teacher-student relationships?

First Days of Class

It is often after you have made contact with your students that you are able to make good decisions about specific goals and methods for your course. The first few class periods are an important part of the information-gathering process. In addition to learning students' names, it is equally important to get a sense of their English skill levels, their attitudes toward English study, how easy they will be to work with, and how well they understand explanations and classroom instructions.

Planning Your Course

First, you should have a plan that gives direction and coherence to your course. Initially, your plans will be very general as you are most likely not in a position to lay out your daily lesson plans for a whole semester. However, having an initial set of goals and plans for materials, methods, and evaluation will help ensure that both you and your students know where you are going.

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Goals. The objective of a course will vary depending on the students' needs, skill levels, study habits, and expectations as well as on materials, facilities, equipment, and institutional guidelines and expectations. Goal setting will depend on the teaching context; different situations call for different kinds of goals. For example, if all participants in the course are high school students preparing for a nationwide standardized exam that determines their opportunity for further education, the goal of the course is clear: help students develop the skills they need to pass the exam. In other settings, students come to class with varied needs, making it difficult to tailor the goals of the course to specific needs. In such a context, the following approaches may work best:

- *Focus on developing a balanced, general set of English skills.* It is no doubt desirable to develop all of the language skills to a high level, but time limitations often demand that you make choices. For example, it is usually better if students' listening skills are more advanced than their speaking skills. Even native speakers of a language can generally understand more than they can say, and there are many situations that depend entirely on listening skills.
- *Emphasize basic knowledge and skills.* Rather than emphasizing situation-specific skills, stick with the basics. For example, stressing general communication skills is more important than stressing the fine points of job interviews.
- *Include a mix of skill goals and content goals.* Some students are better at memorizing, while others may be better at communication or grammar. By including both skill goals (e.g., listening, speaking) and content goals (e.g., vocabulary, grammar), you give students with different strengths the opportunity to demonstrate their ability.
- *Attend to affective factors.* Having explicitly stated goals can make students feel better about their language study, thereby improving the chances they will learn willingly and be able to sustain that willingness over the long haul. General long-term goals enhance student morale by giving a sense of direction; short-term goals let them see their progress in the duration of the course.

Materials. Unlike goals, the choice of materials may be limited. In some situations, the curriculum may prescribe a specific textbook. Other situations may provide a text but allow opportunities for using supplementary materials. In some cases, the available text may be old and uninspiring, and the institution may not require that you use it. There is merit, however, in trying to make some use of the textbook rather than abandoning it all together. Having a textbook saves time in lesson preparation, provides course continuity, makes it easier for students to review, and can help students feel better about their English study.

Methods. The best way to develop a skill is to practice it, and the more the practice resembles the actual application of the skill, the better. Simply put, the way to learn to speak is to practice speaking. This might seem obvious, but often methods are passed down from earlier generations of teachers and students, and the methods do not always fit the goals of the course.

While methods should be chosen on the basis of pedagogical soundness, they should also be acceptable to the students. Methods that are educationally sound may not work in a course because they are too unfamiliar or uncomfortable to the students. In English as a foreign language settings, this is particularly important as students in the class will share a number of common beliefs and customs about language study, and you run into resistance if your methods conflict too much with your students' ideas. It is important for students to learn how to design and carry out their own language learning plans because this is what they will do when they leave formal instruction. The best study program is one that is realistic given the time and resources available.

Evaluation. Evaluation methods have tremendous power to affect positively or negatively the ways your students study, and you need to make good use of this impact to encourage students to study in productive ways. You need to begin thinking about evaluation when you are planning your course rather than waiting until the middle or end of the semester and then wondering how you can put together a midterm or final exam. In addition, you will need to learn the language and culture of grading of your host country; otherwise, your grades may not communicate what they intend.

Lesson Planning and Classroom Survival

During the first few months, your main priority may be getting through as many class periods as possible without disasters, such as exercises that take twice as long as planned or instructions that students completely misunderstand. In a study of one effective reading teacher, Richards (1990) concluded that several qualities were inherent in the lessons: (1) they were designed around the goals set for the course; (2) the instructor made his theories of language learning and teaching explicit to the class; and (3) the lessons had a clear structure—there was an order to the activities, and students were given an idea of the length of the activity in advance. The net effect of constructing lessons as above is that they have a strong sense of direction. Not only were course goals translated clearly into lesson plans, but the connection was made clear to the students.

The best way to make sure you have enough material for a class and that the lessons have a clear sense of direction is to plan each lesson. Two habits help ensure that you prepare adequately. First, set aside a block of time for planning lessons. While time is usually scheduled for class or set aside for grading, lesson planning is often relegated to what is left over from other activities. Second, write lesson plans out rather than memorize them. This forces you to think through your lessons carefully and helps you refine the details. It also provides a written record for future planning.

Another way to give your lessons continuity is to use a set of techniques on a regular basis. Drawing from a set menu of tasks also reduces the amount of time you spend explaining the activities to the class and helps the students relax, as they have a sense of what they are doing (Stevick, 1988).

Adapting to Your Host Culture

Adapting comfortably to life in the host country is important for both your well-being and your teaching. You may find that the efficiency or living conditions of your host country or the organization of your host institution are not what you had imagined; careful consideration of your expectations before you enter the new culture is important. It is not uncommon to experience culture fatigue or burnout as part of the adaptation process. Until you have gained a comfortable mastery of life abroad, life in your host country will place considerable demands on your reserves of energy. Learning about the host culture and learning to speak the host language can help speed the adaptation process, while offering you the significant rewards of living abroad and increasing your self-reliance.

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Stevick, E. (1988). *Teaching and learning languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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